



The Embers Hunger

A Short Story By Rees Walther

Chapter I: The Whispering Flames

In the waning light of an autumn dusk, Elias Grayson arrived at the edge of town, his heart thrumming with anticipation. Before him loomed The Smoldering Pit, an abandoned barbecue restaurant with a history as dark as the soot-stained brick that framed its entrance. He had acquired the property for a modest sum, lured by the promise of restoring it to its former glory.

The restaurant's sign, still hanging by rusted chains, bore the remnants of its former splendor—golden letters dulled by time, charred edges hinting at past conflagrations. But it was the pit, the grand steel behemoth at the heart of the kitchen, that had truly enchanted him. Its doors, polished smooth from decades of use, exuded an air of reverence, as if it bore witness to secrets long buried beneath layers of grease and time.



The town itself seemed to resist his presence, the people glancing warily as he passed. He had heard their mutterings, the superstitions that clung to the place like smoke to old wood. The Smoldering Pit, they said, had not been abandoned without cause. Strange things had transpired there, whispers of the unnatural echoing through its shadowed halls.

But Elias, a man of reason and ambition, dismissed their tales as idle folklore. Superstition had no place in business. He had come to make his mark, to craft a legacy built on the slow dance of smoke and flame.

Yet, the first sight of the pit unsettled him. Though untouched for years, it bore no sign of disrepair. The steel, dark with age and use, gleamed dully in the dim light, as if awaiting its next offering. The grates were clean, the ashpan devoid of dust, as though the fires had never truly

died. A sense of unease stirred within him, a whisper at the back of his mind that something lingered still.

Beyond the restaurant, an adjacent structure loomed—a forgotten relic with hollow windows, a façade crumbling beneath the weight of years. The mere sight of it sent a chill skittering down Elias’s spine. There was a presence about it, something unseen yet keenly felt, as though the building itself inhaled and exhaled with the shifting wind.

Determined to press forward, Elias pushed the disquiet aside. There was work to be done. The past, no matter how gnarled its roots, could not interfere with his future.

As the days passed, he dedicated himself to peeling back the layers of decay, uncovering the bones of the restaurant beneath the dust and grime. The kitchen, with its tarnished steel and soot-streaked walls, carried an air of history that refused to be scrubbed clean. Each scrape of his tools against the steel pit sent a vibration through the space, an echo that lingered longer than it should have, as though the walls themselves were listening.

Even as he worked, he could not shake the feeling of being watched. Shadows pooled in corners where the light should have reached. The rafters groaned with the settling of the structure, yet some noises defied explanation—a distant thud, a whisper carried through the ventilation shafts.

Elias found himself lingering at the threshold of the abandoned structure next door. Something about it called to him, though he could not name the sensation. The boards were nailed fast, their wood warped and splintering, but a single pane of broken glass allowed him to peer inside. The darkness beyond was nearly absolute, but he thought—just for a moment—that he saw movement, the shifting of something just beyond the edge of his sight.

The townsfolk’s warnings returned to him in those quiet moments, tales of flickering shapes glimpsed through the slats of the forgotten structure. They spoke of a man, a lone figure who had once stood watch over the restaurant long after it had closed. Some claimed it was the shade of Jeremiah Cross himself, doomed to linger beside the pit he had worshipped.

At night, the air thickened with the scent of woodsmoke, though no fire had been lit. The winds carried with them a sound just at the threshold of hearing, the indistinct murmur of voices lost to time. Elias dismissed these sensations as tricks of an overworked mind, yet as he turned the key in the lock each evening, he could not shake the feeling that he was not alone.

That night, as he lay in his rented room above the restaurant, the dreams came. Fire roared in his mind, its tendrils licking at the corners of his vision. The scent of charred meat thickened in his nostrils, and he swore he heard something—a voice, soft as smoke, curling through the

flames. He saw figures emerging from the fire, silhouettes writhing and twisting in agony before dissolving into embers.

He woke drenched in sweat, his breath ragged. The echoes of the dream still curled in his mind, whispering things he dared not repeat. He found himself staring at the ceiling, his thoughts drawn inexorably to the pit below. The feeling of unease had blossomed into something greater, something vast and hungry.

The following morning, he wandered the property in search of distractions, but nothing could shake the weight pressing upon him. The pit, for all its silence, seemed to be waiting. He felt it in the way the air thickened around it, the way its steel doors sat slightly ajar as though inviting him to peer inside.

At midday, he resolved to begin testing the smoker. He stacked wood within its steel belly, hands steady despite the gnawing dread coiled within him. He struck a match, watched as the flame took hold. The fire blazed, curling and licking at the wood, and for a moment, Elias felt the warmth drive back the unease that had taken root.

Then came the sound—a soft, almost imperceptible whisper rising with the smoke. The voice was not clear, not words exactly, but something just beyond comprehension, threading through the air like an unseen presence watching, waiting.

The fire burned high, the wood crackling, but Elias found no comfort in its light. He could not shake the sensation that the pit was aware of him now, that it had been waiting for his hands to bring it back to life.

That night, the dreams returned, more vivid than before. He stood before the pit, the fire raging, yet it cast no heat. Shapes writhed in its depths, figures forming and dissolving in the embers. A hand stretched toward him from the smoke, its fingers charred black, its nails clawing at the air. The whisper came again, curling in his ears like a serpent's breath.

He woke with a start, the scent of burning flesh thick in the room, though no fire had been lit. He sat upright, his body trembling, his mind unwilling to accept what it knew to be true.

The pit had awaited him.

And now, it had begun to whisper his name.

Chapter II: Shadows in the Smoke

The days passed in restless toil, each moment thick with a tension Elias could not name. The restaurant, for all its outward progress, felt no less oppressive than it had the night he arrived. He told himself it was merely the weight of responsibility, the strain of rebuilding something long forgotten. But deep within, he knew that was not the truth.

It began with small things, the trivial oddities that could be explained by exhaustion or absentmindedness. Tools misplaced, only to reappear in places he knew he had not left them. The floorboards groaning with footsteps when no one was near. The soft creak of a chair settling in the dining room, as if someone had just risen from their seat. These were things that should have meant nothing, yet in their persistence, they carved at his resolve.

Then came the whispers—at first, so faint he thought they were merely the wind slipping through the rafters. A murmur, threading through the silence of the restaurant when the night pressed against its walls. Yet, they grew, curling around him in empty rooms, their cadence too deliberate to be the result of settling wood and shifting air.

He dismissed the complaints of the workers at first. Men muttered uneasily as they set to their tasks, glancing over their shoulders at nothing. One man swore he saw something move in the corner of the kitchen—a shadow, slipping past the racks of pots and knives. Another refused to enter the basement after hearing a voice whisper his name from the dark. Elias scoffed, brushing aside their fears, but inwardly, he too had felt it—the growing awareness that the pit itself was watching.

Late one evening, long after the last of the crew had fled the place, Elias remained behind. He told himself he was there to finish the final touches on the kitchen, to ensure everything was in place before the grand opening. But in truth, he lingered because he needed to prove to himself that his fears were unfounded, that the weight pressing against his mind was no more than fatigue.

The air in the kitchen hung heavy, thick with the scent of aged wood and steel. He set a pot onto the counter, the clang echoing too loudly in the stillness. The silence stretched, thick and unnatural. Then, from behind him, the unmistakable sound of a knife being drawn against a whetstone.

Elias turned sharply, his pulse hammering in his throat. The kitchen was empty. Yet the sound persisted—a slow, deliberate scraping, rhythmic and unyielding. He swallowed against the dry tightness in his throat. The knives lay still upon their rack, untouched. And yet, the sound did not cease.

A draft curled against his ankles, unnaturally cold. He took a step back, his breath shallow, the whisper of the blade ceasing as suddenly as it had begun. The quiet returned, vast and suffocating. He turned off the lights and left the kitchen behind, but even as he climbed the stairs to his room, he swore he could still hear it—the blade, gliding over stone in the dark.

The following day, he ventured into the basement, determined to confront the unease that had rooted itself within him. The air was colder there, thick with the scent of damp earth and aged brick. He moved carefully, his steps echoing against the stone walls. A flickering bulb cast long shadows, distorting the space into something unfamiliar. And there, along the far wall, he saw them—symbols carved deep into the brick, their edges softened with time but no less insidious.

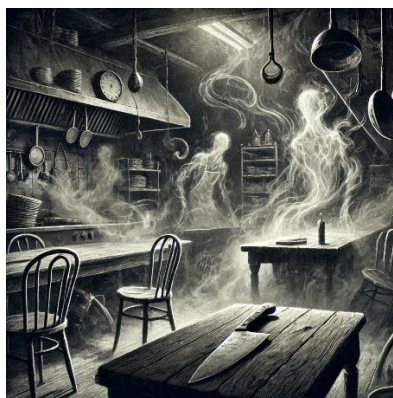
He traced a hand over the markings, the grooves rough beneath his fingertips. He did not know their meaning, yet they unsettled him all the same. They felt ancient, purposeful. As though they had been placed there to keep something within rather than to ward something away.

A sudden, sharp clatter echoed through the basement, and Elias spun on his heel, his breath hitching in his throat. A wrench had fallen from a shelf, rolling to a stop at his feet. His gaze darted around the dimly lit space, but he was alone. Or so he desperately wished to believe.

Determined not to succumb to fear, he picked up the wrench, replacing it with a hand that trembled despite his resolve. The whispers followed him up the stairs, though when he turned back, the basement was still—watching, waiting.

That night, the restaurant seemed alive. The wooden walls groaned under an unseen weight, the windows shuddered though no wind passed through. The smell of fire—burning wood, charred flesh—seeped into the rooms. Elias searched for its source, yet the pit lay cold. The embers, untouched.

The dreams returned, more vivid than ever. He stood before the pit, but now, there were figures among the smoke. They reached for him, their hands blackened and cracked, their mouths forming words he could not hear. The flames burned high, yet the heat did not reach him. And then, a voice—low, rasping, unmistakably human—whispered his name.



He jolted awake, gasping, his body slick with sweat. The room was suffocating, thick with the scent of burning meat. But as he scrambled out of bed, flinging open the door, the air cleared in an instant, leaving nothing but silence in its wake.

Panic clawed at the edges of his mind. The pit, the voices, the shadows—this was no trick of exhaustion. Something was here. Something that had always been waiting.

The next morning, Elias found himself staring into the cold depths of the pit, dread curling in his gut. He could not shake the sensation that he had awoken something. That the pit had noticed him now, and it would not let him leave unscathed.

He was no longer sure if he had come to restore the restaurant or if the restaurant had lured him there. And worse still, he feared he was already too late to turn back.

As he turned away from the pit, footsteps echoed from somewhere within the restaurant, slow and deliberate. He froze, breath shallow, listening. He was not alone.

From the darkness beyond the counter, something shifted, its presence no longer content to remain unseen. A shadow moved where no shadow should have been, and Elias knew then—this was only the beginning.

Chapter III: The Ashes of the Past

Elias spent the next morning trying to shake off the unease that had settled deep in his bones. He busied himself with mundane tasks—sorting through invoices, taking inventory, scrubbing surfaces that had already been cleaned. But the pit was always there, lurking at the edge of his thoughts like a restless specter. It had become more than just a cooking tool; it was an entity, something ancient and insatiable.

That afternoon, determined to root out the history of The Smoldering Pit, Elias visited the town's library. He combed through old newspapers, squinting at microfilm reels that crackled as they spun. The records of the restaurant were sparse, but what little he found was enough to send a chill through him.

Jeremiah Cross had been the original owner, a man whose mastery of smoked meats had been the pride of the town. His reputation had drawn crowds from miles around, yet the stories about him were contradictory. Some praised him as a culinary genius, a pitmaster who had revolutionized the art of barbecue. Others spoke of him in hushed tones, as though mentioning his name might summon something best left forgotten.

There was no official record of his death, no obituary, no final account of his life. The articles simply stopped mentioning him. But there was one unsettling piece—a small, nearly forgotten clipping about his apprentice, Daniel Rourke, who had vanished without a trace. The article suggested that the boy had fled town, though others suspected something more sinister.

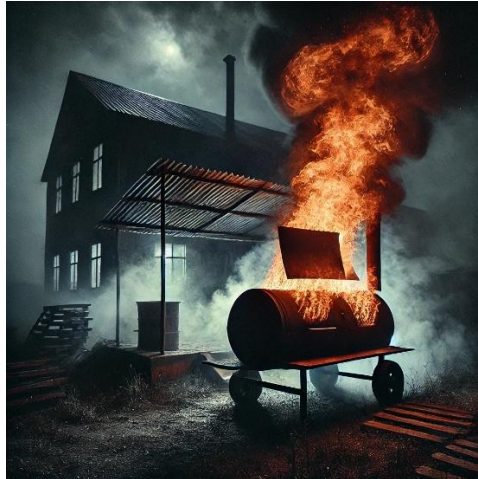
Miss Lillian Vaughn, the town historian, noticed Elias at the microfilm machine and approached, her sharp eyes glinting with curiosity. When he asked about Jeremiah, her lips pursed, and she let out a slow breath before speaking.

"Jeremiah was...obsessed," she said, her voice edged with something between pity and fear. "He believed the fire spoke to him. That it gave him secrets."

Elias listened as she recounted the stories—how Jeremiah had spent long nights alone by the smoker, how customers had begun whispering that the taste of his barbecue had changed. Some claimed they heard him talking to the flames, murmuring words that were not meant for human ears. Then came the rumors of Daniel's disappearance. Some believed he had run away, but others suspected that Jeremiah had not let him go so easily.

"What happened to the restaurant after that?" Elias asked.

Miss Vaughn folded her hands. "The fire," she said simply. "One night, it burned. The whole place should have been reduced to cinders. And yet, the pit remained untouched."



Elias left the library unsettled, Miss Vaughn's words clawing at his thoughts. The fire should have destroyed everything. And yet, it had spared the very heart of the restaurant, as if it were something more than just steel and ash.

That night, as he stood in the kitchen, he could feel the weight of the pit behind him. The embers within had been cold all day, but now—now he swore he could see a faint glow pulsing beneath the grates. The scent of smoke curled through the air, thick and cloying, and with it came a whisper, low and urgent, curling into his ears like tendrils of flame.

"The fire must be fed."

Elias turned sharply, heart hammering, but the restaurant was empty.

He was alone.

Or so he desperately wished to believe.

Determined to clear his head, he stepped outside, inhaling the crisp night air. The town was quiet at this hour, the streets empty save for the occasional flicker of light from a distant window. Yet, as he stood there, the feeling of being watched did not dissipate. It clung to him, an unseen force pressing against his skin. His gaze drifted to the abandoned building next door, its darkened windows gaping like empty eyes.

A sudden creak splintered the silence. Elias stiffened, his breath shallow. From within the depths of the derelict structure, a shadow shifted. He told himself it was the wind, the shifting of old wood settling against time—but deep down, he knew better.

Sleep eluded him that night. When he finally drifted into uneasy slumber, the dreams came once more. This time, he stood inside the pit house, the flames roaring around him. The scent

of seared flesh thickened the air. A figure emerged from the smoke—a man, gaunt and hollow-eyed, his features twisted by the flickering light. His lips moved, forming words Elias could not comprehend. The fire surged, licking at his skin, and the figure stepped closer, his hands outstretched, blackened with soot and something darker still.

Elias woke with a start, gasping. His sheets were damp with sweat, and the acrid scent of smoke still lingered in the air. He sat upright, his pulse hammering. The whisper from his dream still echoed in his ears, a rasping voice from beyond the grave.

Driven by an inexplicable compulsion, he descended to the kitchen, drawn toward the pit. The restaurant was silent, yet it did not feel empty. The embers, which should have long since died, pulsed faintly. Elias stepped closer, peering into its depths. Something moved within, something beyond the ordinary flicker of coals. A shape, indistinct yet undeniably present, coiled through the smoke like a living thing.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the windows, sending a chill down his spine. Elias stepped back, his hands shaking. The pit was no mere tool. It was something else entirely—something waiting, something hungry.

The fire must be fed.

The words coiled in his mind, a command that was not his own. He clenched his jaw, shaking his head, as if doing so could dislodge the thought. He needed answers. Real answers. And he would not find them here, standing alone in the dark.

The next morning, he returned to Miss Vaughn, demanding to know more. “What really happened to Jeremiah?” he asked, his voice taut. “And to Daniel?”

Miss Vaughn hesitated, then sighed, as if resigning herself to some long-held burden. “There are stories,” she said carefully. “Some say Jeremiah lost his mind. That he wasn’t feeding the fire with just wood anymore.”

A cold dread settled over Elias. “What do you mean?”

Miss Vaughn met his gaze. “Some believe he fed it...with something else. That’s why the meat began to taste different. And why Daniel was never seen again.”

Elias felt his stomach turn. He had heard ghost stories before, but this—this was different. This was too close. Too real.

As he left, her final words followed him like an omen.

“If the fire still burns, then Jeremiah never truly left.”

Chapter IV: Embers of the Unseen

Darkness had woven itself into the very bones of The Smoldering Pit, settling in the crevices, lingering in the rafters, breathing in the spaces where the light dared not reach. Elias, ever the rational man, had resisted—oh, how he had resisted!—the creeping dread that coiled around him like a viper in the night. But the house of smoke and fire was no ordinary place, and the rational world had long since turned its back upon him.

First, it had been the small things, the trifles of the distracted mind. A missing cleaver, found lodged deep in the wooden floor. A carving fork, its tines sunk into the wall as if hurled by some unseen hand. Knives that slithered from their sheaths and came to rest in places he did not recall. And then—oh, then!—came the greater signs, the dreadful tokens of a presence that had been roused from its slumber.

One evening, having locked the doors and bolted the windows against the unknown forces that whispered through the timbers, Elias returned to the kitchen to find it in disarray. Every drawer lay open, their contents scattered across the floor like the remains of a gutted beast. The wooden cutting boards bore deep, jagged gouges, as if some terrible hand had taken blade to flesh and left its mark upon the very bones of the place. He swallowed, his throat dry, his fingers twitching at his sides. No one had entered. No one could have entered.

Yet something had.

His sleep became a place of torment. Shadows twisted in the smoke of his dreams, reaching, grasping, clawing. The pit roared, its flames rising high, licking at the heavens as if seeking to consume the very sky. The scent—oh, the scent!—of charred flesh curled in his nostrils, thick and cloying, and within the infernal glow, he saw them. Figures, writhing, blackened husks, their mouths gaping in silent screams. And among them, his face gaunt and grinning, stood Jeremiah Cross.

“You must feed it, Elias.”

He woke, gasping, his sheets damp with sweat. Some nights, the air in his room was choked with the acrid scent of burnt meat, though no fire had been lit. Other nights, he awoke to the sensation of unseen hands pressing against his chest, forcing the breath from his lungs. He would rise, shaken, and stand before the pit, staring into its cold, unyielding mouth. Each time, he swore—swore!—that he saw something shift within the embers, something more than heat, something watching.

Then, the footprints appeared.

One morning, stumbling into the dining area, he halted mid-step, his breath catching in his throat. A trail of soot-covered prints led from the smoker to the center of the room. Human

prints, yet misshapen—elongated, twisted at the edges as if the fire had warped them. They stopped at a table, standing stark against the wooden planks. Had something stood there? Had it watched him sleep?

His hands trembled as he traced the path back to the pit. The steel door lay slightly ajar, the faintest pulse of embers still smoldering within. He had not touched the smoker in days.

And yet, it had been fed.

The night after, the smoker firepit door creaked open of its own accord. Elias turned, dread pooling in his gut. The air thickened, the shadows deepened, and from within the swirling tendrils of smoke, a figure emerged.



It was not flesh, nor was it entirely spirit, but something in between—a thing caught between worlds, its presence half-formed and yet undeniable. Gaunt and skeletal, its hollow eyes burned with an ember's glow. In its gnarled hands, it clutched a cleaver, the blade glinting with an unnatural sheen. And though it did not speak, Elias heard its voice all the same, curling through the silence like smoke through a keyhole.

The pit must be fed.

The weight of the words pressed against his chest, stealing the breath from his lungs. The scent of burning flesh grew thick, suffocating, rancid and sweet. The figure did not move toward him,

yet Elias felt himself being drawn forward, his limbs sluggish, uncooperative, as though unseen hands guided him.

With the last vestige of his will, he tore himself back, stumbling into the dining area. The smokehouse door slammed shut behind him, the sound reverberating through the empty halls.

Elias stood motionless, his pulse hammering against his ribs. He did not move, did not speak, until at last, when he summoned the courage to return, he found the smokehouse empty. No sign of the figure. No trace of disturbance.

Only the scent remained.

The grand opening loomed, but the idea of customers—of life—returning to this place felt absurd. The pit had no interest in crowds, in laughter, in the bustle of the living. It was a thing of old hunger, of ancient needs. It had chosen him, and it would not relent.

That morning, as he washed his face in the kitchen sink, Elias lifted his gaze to the polished steel of the refrigerator. His own reflection peered back at him, hollow-eyed, weary. But something was amiss. He leaned closer, heart hammering. His reflection lingered—a fraction of a second too long—after he had moved.

A chill raced down his spine. He reached up, pressing his hand to the cold surface. His breath fogged against the steel, and in that moment, his reflection did something he did not.

It smiled.

He lurched back, a strangled gasp escaping his lips. From the doorway, something stirred. A shadow, barely there, flickered at the edge of his vision.

The whisper returned, a breath against his ear, a promise, a curse.

“You cannot fight it.”

He clenched his fists, willing himself to resist. But the restaurant, the pit, the fire—it had sunk its claws into him, embedding its will within his very bones. The embers burned hotter, and in the polished steel, the reflection of the fire behind him seemed brighter, taller—hungry.

It was waiting. And it would not wait forever.

The pit had been fed.

But it had not yet been satisfied.

Chapter V: The Devouring Flame

The night of reckoning had come. Elias, no longer a man of reason, no longer a man of flesh alone, sat within the silent halls of The Smoldering Pit, a journal laid open before him, a bottle of whiskey clutched in his trembling grip. The candlelight flickered weakly, casting shadows that stretched and twisted across the walls, bending in ways that no earthly light should have allowed.

He had resolved to confront the truth. The whispers had grown bolder, shifting from indistinct murmurs to voices—voices that crept through the walls, slithered beneath the floorboards, and curled into his ears like acrid smoke. They no longer waited for the solitude of night; they called to him in daylight, a chorus of hunger, of longing, of rage.

The pit. The pit must be fed.

With a final swallow of whiskey, Elias steadied himself, his grip tightening around his pen. He would record what transpired, would commit the truth to paper, if only to prove—to whom, he knew not—that he had not lost himself entirely. The restaurant had become a thing alive, its walls pulsing, its air thick with the scent of fire, its very bones groaning with ancient hunger. It had chosen him, as it had chosen Jeremiah before him.

And Jeremiah had answered.

The first sound was a slow, deliberate creak, as though unseen hands dragged nails along wood. Elias stiffened, his breath shallowing. The candle's flame trembled as the air grew dense, leaden with a presence unseen but wholly felt. Then came the shadows, gathering at the edges of the room, seeping from the floor like thick tendrils of soot.

A gust of wind, sudden and cold, swept through the room, snuffing the candle's feeble light. Elias did not move. He dared not. The darkness was absolute, save for the faint, pulsing glow from the embers in the pit beyond.

Then, the voice.

"You have stolen what is not yours."

It was a rasp, a hiss, a voice that carried the weight of burning coals and the wailing of the lost. Elias turned, his fingers gripping the edge of the table so tightly that his knuckles whitened. From within the smoke, a figure emerged—thin, hollow, wrapped in the tattered remnants of a life long past.

Jeremiah Cross.

His eyes burned like embers set deep within sunken sockets. His mouth curled in a rictus grin, teeth blackened by soot. The cleaver in his hand glistened, though no light should have reached it. Elias could not speak, could not breathe. He could only watch as Jeremiah stepped closer, the weight of the unseen pressing down upon him like a hand at his throat.

“You have taken my fire,” the specter rasped, smoke curling from his lips as he spoke. “And now, it must take you.”

The embers in the firebox flared, bursting into an unnatural bloom of light. But this was no ordinary flame—it writhed, twisting as though possessed of its own will, a beast unshackled from its cage. It was no longer wood that fueled its hunger. No, it had long since abandoned such meager fare.

The pit had been fed before.

Elias staggered backward, the room spinning, the walls closing in. The truth—oh, the terrible truth!—descended upon him with the weight of iron. The fire, this fire, had never been meant for mere meat, for the crude consumption of mortals. It had been a thing of devotion, a thing that required offerings far more precious than wood and smoke. Jeremiah had known. And now, Elias understood.

The air burned as the flames leapt higher, their light stretching toward him, calling him. The whispers had grown into wails, the voices of those who had come before, who had fed the pit, who had been devoured by its hunger. And then, as if summoned by the very force of his dread, the long-sealed doors of the abandoned building next door groaned upon their rusted hinges, yawning open like a mouth long deprived of sustenance.

Elias turned toward the sound, his heart hammering against his ribs. Beyond the doorway, past the veil of dust and time, lay the remnants of a place long forsaken. The walls bore the scorch marks of forgotten flames. Rusted metal trays lined the halls, their surfaces blackened with stains unspoken. Urns, shattered and whole alike, lay strewn across the floor, their contents long since turned to dust.

A crematorium.

The realization struck him like a blow. The fire that roared behind him was the same fire that had burned within this place, the same fire that had reduced bodies to ash, the same fire that Jeremiah had worshipped, that he had fed.

And now, it was hungry once more.

The wind howled through the broken windows, and suddenly—violently—Elias felt it. The hands. Hands unseen, yet unmistakably real, shoving him forward, forcing him toward the pit,

toward the insatiable maw of flame. He struggled, clawed at the air, but the force was undeniable. His body, once his own, no longer obeyed him. The heat seared his skin, the fire's voice an infernal symphony in his ears.

The pit, no longer confined to its steel walls, roared with anticipation, tendrils of flame reaching, curling, lashing like the tongues of a starved beast. Shadows within the fire writhed, forming the twisted echoes of those it had claimed before. Their blackened hands stretched toward him, pleading, beckoning.

The scent of charred meat, thick and cloying, filled his lungs. His mind wavered, his vision swimming in the oppressive glow of the inferno. A scream—his own, or another's, he could no longer tell—pierced the cacophony of crackling embers.

The last thing he saw before the darkness took him was Jeremiah's face, twisted in triumph, his lips curling as he whispered the words Elias had heard so many times before:

"The fire must always be fed."

